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JOHN RUSKIN'S SOCIAL AND POLITICAL THEORY IN HIS ECONOMIC WRITINGS

Camelia FIRICĂ

Spiru Haret University Bucharest, **Romania**

Faculty of Management Financial Accounting Craiova

cameliafirica@yahoo.com

Abstract

Art, poetry and political economy were instruments that John Ruskin attempted to reshape the man of his time with. The appreciated Victorian writer, literary and art critic and political philosopher tried to apply to the artistic riches the general idea of economic riches such as: discovery, utilization, accumulation and distribution. According to Ruskin's conception economists have as a task to state what things provide life and to decide how they can be acquired and distributed.

Key words: political economy, wealth, man, education, intellectual progress, moral progress

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1. Introduction

John Ruskin is considered by Jaques Bardoux (1901, 9) along side with Thomas Carlyle, Charles Dickens, Mathew Arnold among the great names to whom the social and idealist movement of the 19th Victorian era confines. As the chief leader of this group of famous writers, Carlyle exercised a great influence upon the pleiad and, in his opinion, the writer is *an interpreter of the divine idea which lays at the basis of appearance and ... the developer of the infinite*. [Bardoux, (1901), 10]. According to Carlyle, the writer's works will be reliable, good, useful and beautiful if he nourishes solid convictions and feelings, if a person can draw out from his works, a theory of nature and a painting of race.

Of all reformers who were influenced by Carlyle the most original and the most efficient was John Ruskin. It is in Carlyle's works that John Ruskin found a part of his economic theories. His mysticism is not pantheistic as Carlyle's mysticism is, but aesthetic and Christian, less violent but passionate too, also fervent in his convictions.

Ruskin was preoccupied by the idea of people's state misery and he was aware of the calling of his mission. Carlyle was to Ruskin not only his master but also his friend and it was this friendship that influenced, guided and directed him to the study of all social problems and encouraged him throughout his activity. It was the reading of Carlyle's works *Sartor Resartus* (1832) and *Past and Present* (1843) that revealed to Ruskin the contemporary social order denounced by Carlyle in a vigorously biting style, as an everlasting contradiction with Christ's words and the promises of the Bible.

John Ruskin was shaped and formed in the spirit of the scholastic discipline at Oxford and he was nourished with the Bible principles, Walter Scott's ideas and love for journeys in

the middle of nature so much ignored by the English. For his talent Ruskin deserves to be compared with Carlyle but by his actions he is maybe superior to his predecessor. Ruskin embodied, like Carlyle, all the characteristics of the literary movement to which he attached his name. Ruskin sought successively a way to rebuild, recreate and reshape, from the moral point of view, the man of his time; and in order to achieve this goal he made use of art, poetry and political economy. Referring to his own works on political economy Ruskin declared that, of all his works, those he had written on political economy are the most truthful in content and the most judicious in shape. The pages Ruskin dedicated to the study of political economy do not form a distinct part of his entire work. His life is not separated in two periods; it is not a revolution but an evolution of his ideas that can be clearly noticed.

The guiding idea of Ruskin's political economy, his conception regarding the state's paternal role can be found in the conferences about art that took place in Manchester in 1854. He tried to apply to the artistic riches the general idea of economic riches such as: discovery, utilization, accumulation and distribution.

According to his outlook, in each town there should be established, at Government expenses, experimental schools that might be attended by any child who considers he has natural inclination for that particular type of training.

The State should provide convenient jobs to and for those who possess uncommon qualities, abilities, skills as they shouldn't exhaust themselves in the struggle for life.

There should be two stages of the artist's transformation into a *gentleman*: competition which will be dedicated to stimulate zeal, and lessons of moral and education. Under these circumstances the word *gentleman* means to Ruskin *an honest man*.

Ruskin asserts that liberalism is a dangerous utopia and he asks himself what man would become if he were given whole liberty. In Ruskin's opinion, and according to his principles, life is safe only if it is dedicated to work, to reprimand and support, to government and to punishment. The idea of liberty was not a delight for the legislator, because he is convinced that man must establish the laws and authorities that will guide him throughout his work, which will protect him against his madness and will help him in his misfortunes.

The school of Manchester endured numerous attacks during the former half of the 19th century. Wilfred Owen was the first who began the fight on the social field and the Chartist movement came to continue it on political field. Carlyle and his disciples, Maurice and Kingsley, who had founded the Christian Socialism, can also be mentioned among the fighters who combated with the School of Manchester.

Joining in the same movement Ruskin was the leader of a new army of opponents and disputants who condemned that particular type of doctrine that, starting from a false conception about man, doesn't take into account the moral laws when organizes society. The radical antagonism between the theories of the School of Manchester and Ruskin's economic ideas can be noticed in his *Unto this last* (1860) and *Munera Pulveris* (1862/1863, 1872).

In order to give their precepts an apparently solid basis, classical economists such as Adam Smith, Malthus and others, had analysed human nature. They tried to relieve man's activity from the hindrances created by manners, environment and education as well as by religion as a moral tradition. Disregarding the everlasting and truthfully human feature of this chain inside individual, they destroyed it. A human being who has his own life and necessities to comply with, this is the type of man whose actions political economy wants to study and this is the activity whose laws it pretends to have discovered. So, according to classical economists, the moral principles are accidental and subordinate elements of the human nature while the necessity to satisfy them is the permanent and constant element.

Ruskin settled that the discovery of wealth and riches and the act of producing and gathering capital (assets) are the two stages man has to undergo in order to satisfy his own necessities. In his judgement classical economists are not in the position to solve the problems raised by these two formulae. Ruskin criticized Stuart Mill for his conviction and belief according to which wealth consists of all useful and agreeable objects that possess an exchange value. Mill favours the idea that useful and agreeable objects are at the basis of value and exchange, while Ruskin considers that the economical value is determined not only by the nature of objects but also by the number of people who need it, want and can use it, whence it follows that the useful character of things depends on the human faculty corresponding to it. Ruskin also asserts that the agreeable character of a certain thing is determined not only by the attraction it is capable to exercise upon people, but also by the number of people willing to let themselves seduced by it, meaning that the agreeable character of a thing depends on the human mood and willingness that tally with it. Ruskin concludes that political economy, which is the science of wealth, must equally be the science of human disposition, willingness, mood and faculties. The way classical economists analysed the functions of capital was also an opportunity for Ruskin to criticize them since he considers that kind of analysis as deficient, imperfect. Gathering a certain amount of capital or assets is not the ultimate stage of the economic activity but a middle one.

The capital is that substance, matter and essence that produces derived and secondary goods and it fulfils its real purpose if it generates things and goods that are different from it. Ruskin considers the analysis the economists of the time made on capital as being an incomplete one, and disagrees with them because they used to look over and consider capital as a merely reserve, stock, deposit and not as a source for producing secondary, derived goods.

The phenomenon that sums up the terms utility, value, wealth, capital, assets embraces the human being. These terms may be concentrated in clear definitions and formulae that should ground their study upon a thorough analysis of man and should not refuse to study what is best and most important inside the human being – namely the spirit. It was also in the name of moral that Ruskin attacked those laws by which political economy pretends to explain the manifestations of man's activity: the particular laws of supply and demand, and the general law of competition. According to the then economists it would be enough to offer a price conditioned by supply and demand in order to obtain a service. Ruskin shows and proves that this would be very likely to happen if the worker were a machine propelled by steam whose force might be calculated; but man is that particular instrument set in motion and put into service by *soul*. The merely promise of wages will not be able to supply this strange machine with the whole amount of effort and work it can provide. The extreme point will be reached *only when the motive power – the will is brought to the maximum pressure by the agency of the fuel which is characteristic to it, namely patience*. [Ruskin, (1936), 113].

Ruskin concludes that the law of supply and demand is neither unfailing, nor immutable because it is not, and it will never be completely objective.

As to the law of competition, which is considered a necessity by the economists, one can say that Ruskin did not find in it any economic advantages; on the contrary, he traced and admitted its disadvantages. The merchant, the man of commerce is considered, by people, to belong *to an inferior grade of human personality*. [Ruskin, (1936), 28–29]. In his *Crown of Wild Olive* (1866) Ruskin stresses out upon the difference between economists and he notices that this difference came from the fact that some of them had studied only one branch of man's activity – namely his efforts to comply with his necessities – while the others had been more interested in art and social sciences and they subordinated their general doctrine, and

even their personal, individual theories to the steadfast, constant goal of improving humanity's moral conduct.

Considering the way Ruskin defined political economy, he can be integrated in the group towards which he was driven by the natural tendencies of his spirit, by the pathos of his polemics, by the general character of his life. In Ruskin's opinion *political economy is neither an art nor a science but a system of legislation and conducts founded upon sciences which can be achieved under certain conditions of moral culture*. [Ruskin, (1968), 120]. This definition points out the fact that Ruskin settled a boundary between him and the classical school, and helps us understand the goal of his study. Political economy has as a purpose to multiply the human life in its highest type. The ideal type of humanity implies perfection of the human body, of heart and intellect, whence it follows that the material target – to produce, to use, to accumulate with the purpose of using – that belongs to the political economy, are things that are useful *either to support the body and stimulate its sensitiveness, or to shape its intellect*. [Ruskin, (1968), 122].

As the object of political economy is the above mentioned one, Ruskin considers that the economists' assignment is to settle which things provide life and to decide how they can be obtained and distributed. This quest can be accomplished by following three directions: the analysis of fortune, of wealth and of currency. The study of fortune is a branch of natural science and it deals with the essential characteristics of things, the study of wealth is a branch of moral science and it deals with the exact relation between men and the subject of the material possessions while the study of currency is a branch of commercial science and it studies the conditions of exchange. In a word, Ruskin considers that political economy deals with the study of three problems: the problem of value, the problem of commerce or of value's circulation and the problem of labour. By each of the solutions Ruskin suggests, he intends once again, to confute the three theories that are specific to the School of Manchester: the law of supply and demand, the law of competition, and the *laissez-faire* dogma.

When, in his work *Unto this last*, Ruskin comments upon the notion of value he declares that value and the quality of being valuable implies usefulness and profitableness for life, and maps out five groups of valuable objects. First of all he mentions earth together with air and water and everything related to them; as they provide our food and give birth to a mechanical force their value is double. They represent a delight for our eyes and soul, a source of reflection for our deepest thoughts and beget intellectual force. In the second group buildings, furniture and tools must be integrated. The value of the buildings is double, too. Their value rests in the ever-lasting solidity, which avails their long-term utility, in the beauty of their architecture and in their historical evidence and importance. Thirdly comes the group that comprises nourishment, means of subsistence, luxury articles and drugs followed by the group of books, meant to convey, from generation to generation, facts and knowledge that develop sensitiveness and intellectual activity. The last but not the least group mentioned by Ruskin is that of the works of art. Value means the power of a certain thing to entertain life; it depends on man's judgement and on the stock's quality, and it becomes efficient when it belongs to that particular person who has a certain degree of vital force. When value is efficient one can say that the possessor is wealthy. Wealth is regarded as the possession of valuables by courageous people. Ruskin considers life to be the only wealth. *That nation is the wealthiest that nourishes the greatest number of happy and noble human beings; that person is the richest who has the largest favourable influence upon the others, by the agency of his own personality and his possessions*. [Ruskin (1936), 136].

The conclusions of the objective analysis Ruskin gives us can be summed up as follows: wealth is the efficient possession of valuable things and value is the intrinsic

capacity of things to support existence, life. Combining the intrinsic character of value and the subjective character of wealth, Ruskin specifies the accounts that relate individual morality with the fruitfulness of the national and private capital. A huge capital is an unavailable condition for the development of a country's security, morality and commerce.

According to Ruskin's thinking the analysis of the social capital implies two questions: which is its value and which its relations with the number of inhabitants. As he states, this type of analysis is necessary in order to ascertain, to determine the value of the national wealth. The presence of things without intrinsic value in the social capital does not necessarily imply the corresponding absence of the valuable objects. Generally, useless and unvalued goods are produced as laughing objects, and nothing should have been produced instead of them, as they were made in wasted moments. If wealth consists in all means of subsistence a country will never become rich by reducing the number of its inhabitants; consequently, of two nations that have equal capital, the one that has the greatest number of inhabitants will be the wealthiest. That economist who wants to find out if a country must be considered wealthy or not, will have to compare the number of the poor with that of the rich. Individual capital, like the social capital *represents wealth only if a certain vital force of the possessors agrees with the intrinsic value of the object*. [Ruskin, (1968), 93–94].

Ruskin finds it more important and interesting to know who the possessors are than to have knowledge of what they possess. A nation will be rich the moment a moral and intellectual progress of its inhabitants will be achieved and noticeable.

A very ingenious effort of joining together the political economy and moral improvement breaks out from the statement that Ruskin made when he referred to the problem of value and capital, but however he did not analyse the concept of value without contradicting himself. When he asserted that the value of an object depended on its quality, he concurrently sent forth the most improbable paradox and, after he had asserted that value was intrinsic, objective, he remarked that the actual value of an object depended on its possible utilization. Thus Ruskin worded and delivered the most naïve contradiction but, despite this fact, his objections were correct and the author of *Unto this last* became a remarkable precursor. Where he pointed out certain errors and gaps, political economy made a step forward and evolved under the passionate pressure of the socialist school, some conceptions were abandoned, the notions of wealth and capital were enlarged and the idea of value was thoroughly analysed.

The analysis of commercial circulation is subdivided by Ruskin into two branches: the study of currency and that of exchange but, in both of them, his theories will be unaccountable unless one takes into consideration the fact that the standard of value is the standard of life and wealth means the possession of fortifying objects by vivid spirits.

What is currency? Currency is *a way of public acknowledgement of a debt that will be received by any person in exchange for a piece that will entitle him to receive its equivalent, in any place, at any time, doesn't matter in what manner*. [Ruskin, (1968), 18]. The best monetary system will be the one that, having the greatest steadiness possible, will not be part of value's characteristics and will not be mistaken for wealth.

Modern societies began to use gold as the only basis of their monetary system but gold is not a good currency as long as it can be sold, and it is not a proper object of value, as long as its value of exchange comes to disturb its public utilization; the opportunity to get other goods in exchange for gold always depends on its attractiveness and on the existing stock of gold in circulation. Currency must be based on several substances of an intrinsic and more real value instead of only one. Ruskin noticed that the steadiness of currency circulation

depended on how large its basis was. Currency was not considered a means of exchange but a title of faith; to possess capital and to possess money were not two synonymous phrases. It was asserted that wealth requires the capitalist to have a certain degree of life in his heart and thinking, while having mere faith doesn't require the owner to have this type of qualities. If money is not a means of exchange but only a simple title of faith it is normal that money will not be productive. It is the physiocrats from whom Ruskin borrowed his conception about value and was also inspired by them in his theory about exchange. For Ruskin, an advantageous exchange always implies the inability or ignorance of one of the two parts. With the purpose in view of establishing a new theory Ruskin suggests the following laws: *There must be reciprocal advantage in the process of exchange or there mustn't be any disadvantage for either of the traders. It's important that any amount of time, work and intelligence of the intermediary should be rewarded* [Ruskin, (1936), 130–134].

There are two different ideas in this theory of exchange. The former one is an idea of social art, a moral precept – there must be reciprocal advantage when it comes to exchange; the latter one is an idea of economic science – there must never be profit in the process of exchange.

The two principles that governed Ruskin's ideas about economy are the two negations – the negation of liberty and that of equality. The individual is not entitled to liberty: the state may impose to his activity the restrictions it will consider as being useful for the progress of society, the same as nature has imposed its minute set of rules. The individual is not entitled to equality: the historical traditions and the social necessities brought about the creation of a hierarchy; each citizen must observe laws and he must try to reach real perfection. The state will organize social work in such a way as to succeed in decreasing as much as possible the negative consequences of the struggle for life; it must look after the disabled and old people and must provide them a safe place and home.

A second series of measures, that should be adopted, should have as a general purpose and goal the annulment of the consequences competition has upon value and upon the price of goods. The foundation of national manufactures, the re-establishment of the corporations, these are the means Ruskin foresaw in order to fulfil the above-mentioned target. Government will establish manufactures and stores to assure the manufacturing and selling of those products necessary to life. The state will not have to impose restrictions or to hinder the private enterprises; on the contrary it will have to give them whole freedom but it will have to watch over the goods that are made and sold because *bread must be bread and beer must be beer*. [Ruskin, (1936), 17–18].

Corporations will come to complete what the state achieved. The corporation council will settle the pattern and price of the manufactured products as well as the wages for the workers. So, according to Ruskin's idea of a system there will be three types of stores: those of the free merchants, those of the corporations and those of the state. Ruskin intended to annul the variations whose moral and financial consequences he feared and he was going to achieve this by the organization of production.

A certain idealism characterises legislation that is considered to have the mission to lead mankind towards moral perfection. Vice and indolence must be uprooted and punished with the same rigour in town and on board of the ship. The right of constraint and coercion held by those who work, over those who idle and disturb the process of work must also be absolute in society. The right to equally share everything necessary to life in common is also inalienable both in society and on board of the ship. The right of those who are ill and disabled, to be protected by the strong ones is also imperative and the necessity to grant, to vouch-safe the authority of the government, to the one who is a real, skilful pilot, is constant

and clear. The state will have the role to impose its citizens the laws, considered necessary in order to achieve the unity of efforts and continuity in progress.

Ruskin drew up a plan of a vast code that embraces the whole human activity.

The first branch of legislation points out what can and what cannot be done. Man's liberty won't be restricted unless he did something wrong.

The second branch shows what can and what cannot be possessed. These laws have a double purpose: to show what a citizen can possess and at the same time to stress out which are the objects that community is not allowed to possess. Ruskin suggested that the accumulation of all kinds of goods should be limited, but at the same time he remembers the necessity to give man the right to possess a certain parcel of ground. *The State will authorize each man to become an owner, a proprietor, as a parent allows his son to marry.* [Ruskin, (1906), 85].

Finally a third branch of legislation will be made up by the extension of the penal code; laws will specify *what a man may or may not endure. The owner will be responsible for the conduct and behaviour of the people who are subjected to his laws.* [Ruskin, (1906), 8].

Through this organization of work Ruskin wanted to abolish competition and to pave the way for a moral revival. Fighting against human cupidity and greediness and enforcing the respect superiors must display towards their subordinates, Ruskin succeeded to reduce the consequences of competition. One of his intentions was to renew the moral and economic situation of the contemporary societies. In order to supervise that such a minute code of complex structure and organization should be put into practice and should function, the state will have to increase the number of its employees. This ideal type of administration will be divided, in keeping with Ruskin, in seven groups: the first one will have to study and supervise each citizen, the second will set up assistance, a third group will control industrial explorations. The magisterial and teaching staff will be added to these. Referring to the seventh group Ruskin asserted that *an exemplary authority is that authority that will set good example to others and will show what is best and most beautiful in the art of life.* [Ruskin (1906), 182–191].

This was at large Ruskin's conception about an ideal administrative reorganization; its failure can be accounted for by the contradictions that have ruined Ruskin's system. The same author who accepted the three principles of the socialist school – the nationalization of public utility services and the establishment of national stores, the annulment of revenue, the establishment of wages and work hours as the basis of exchange, rejects the idea of land nationalization. Ruskin declares his consideration for property but on the other hand he pretends that certain limits for private wealth should be imposed.

One of the problems that dominated Ruskin's thinking was expressed as follows: *What could we initiate in order to render to our horizon its serenity, and to our society the calm of peace?* [Ruskin (1906), 89] and the answer was – to undertake a moral reform – that must be, as Carlyle maintained, useful and everlasting. This idea expounded so clearly by Ruskin, represents the most beautiful and durable part of his economic work.

There are two facts that concerned Ruskin simultaneously: the beauty of being an active and busy person during the lifetime span and the necessity and beauty of Christianity. Life is beautiful when it is not motionless, immobile and uneventful. It must be a permanent fight not against people, but against itself. And during this painful march life signifies, noble souls find out *that something* vainly looked for and chased after, which is like a ghost, appears only for a moment and whose name is – *happiness. The sweetest pleasure of youth vanishes in obscurity – that is greater than the past splendour –...while, on the contrary,*

daily hard and assiduous work fills us with joy and delight. (Ruskin, 1907, 184–185). Life is nice and good provided that it is devoted to the purpose of reaching a moral ideal. There is a certain morality for each nation and for each individual. Sensitiveness, the natural perception of the beauty, truth, and goodness, the energy expressed by its fidelity towards the acquired traditions and customs – these are the real conditions of a nation's state of morality. Action supports and keeps up the great moral law of nations as well as people's life. People strove to improve their sensitiveness and thinking while nations strive to preserve their moral traditions. Putting into practice the Christian principles for the assiduous improvement of one's soul, this is the purpose that individual morality has in view; the constant melioration of the existing relations among people belonging to different social classes, different sexes and different ages this is the purpose of social morality,

Speaking about the mission the artists and men of science have to fulfil, Ruskin considers them to be the ones who train, educate and divert the vast masses of suffering, grieving people. Those who have understood that it is not necessary to be rich for being influential and respected may consider themselves happy because, sooner or later, they will be rewarded. The members of the social elite will carry out their mission and duties the moment they offer the unhappy people who form the community, a part of their pecuniary, literary, artistic and scientific wealth. If the members of the social elite are in just, fair and constant relations with the other members of the community, new moral obligations will come to underline their general duties; this is the case of the owner, landlord or of the trader who, instead of asking huge prices, or instead of falsifying the goods he trades should accept to be poor and work; this is the case of the soldier, who should choose to be killed than to leave his post.

Harmony that underlines the relations between the social classes must also exist between sexes; this is the context in which Ruskin dealt with women's mission. He rejected the idea of *modern women* and criticized Stuart Mill for having declared that women must have a more lucrative occupation than that of nourishing babies. Ruskin condemned the fact that women might become engineers or teachers or anything else. This doesn't mean that he turned back to the old precept and theory that proclaimed male superiority.

Each sex has something peculiar that the other one lacks so they complement each other. The moralist settled a task for both man and woman. Man's force lays in action, progress, and defence; he is the one who creates, explains, defeats and defences at the same time. His intellect makes speculations and inventions, his energy wins. Despite the fact that women, according to Ruskin's conception, don't invent or create, but in exchange they are able to decide, to classify, to tidy up and to array themselves women are perfectly aware of the quality of things, of their accurate names and proper place. In family, in society, in state institutions woman's task will be to organize, to tidy up, to manage. In this particular case to manage is not synonymous with to lead. It means that women will act upon male souls as there are delicate and noble feelings in man's heart most often inspired by women. Due to the purity of their souls women will always be queens, "*queens for their lovers, queens for their husbands and their sons, queens, much more mysterious, for the people who bowed, and will always bow in front of their crown and sceptre.*" [Ruskin, (1907), 135]. Inside her own house a woman must be queen and she will remain so as long as she keeps in mind the truth that man—no matter if her fiancée, husband or son— is but the mirror reflecting her very image. Home will be everywhere she is. What is difficult for a woman is not to endure the whims of fate – love will help her endure them well – but to continue to be heroic in happiness and not to forget God when He offered her everything she languished after. This is the real courage, as Ruskin says. He appeals to women and asks them to pray for their sons and husbands, whose lives and characters are in their hands. Men will be what women want them to be, as

women are the centre of their homes, the centre of goodness and excellence and they exercise a charitable task where beauty and order are scarce. If corruption, which reached the literary and political field as well as individuals, did not touch the home, this will mean safety and society will be safe, too; the day corruption touches the home, especially the woman, society will be irremediably lost because humanity's sources of physical and moral life will be imprisoned. When society follows this path no human force will be able to stop its decline.

Ruskin's call and warning was heard – hundreds of associations were founded by those women who had understood the beauty of their goal, the necessity of their actions.

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